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Reconstructing Violence: The Southern Rape Complex in Film and Literature

Lindsay Silver Hollembaek

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Review

Hollembaek, Lindsay Silver

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Barker, Deborah E. *Reconstructing Violence: The Southern Rape Complex in Film and Literature*. Louisiana State University Press, \$47.50 ISBN 9780807160626

Filmic Power of the Southern Rape Complex in American Culture

In *Reconstructing Violence: The Southern Rape Complex in Film and Literature*, Deborah E. Barker explores the cinematic power of the southern race complex over the last one hundred years. Barker's theoretical framework and analysis heavily relies on the work of Gilles Deleuze's *Cinema 1* and *Cinema 2* to explore the filming techniques in *The Birth of the Nation* (1915), *The Story of Temple Drake* (1933), *Sanctuary* (1958), *Touch of Evil* (1958), *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1962), and *Cape Fear* (1962).

In using *The Birth of the Nation* as a template for the southern race complex in film, Barker's goal is to examine "the protean power behind the iconic images and the dominant narratives associated with the southern rape complex and how they have been assembled and reassembled over time in film and literature, in conjunction with the shifting contentious racial and sexual politics not only of the South but the nation as a whole" (2). In order to achieve this goal, Barker places the selected films in conversation with the novels they were adapted from as well as placing the films in conversation with each other. The common element of the southern rape complex that these selected films share is the "tensions between national and state laws and/or culture in an effort to maintain white middle-and upper-class domination as an unproblematic norm" (5). The range of films Barker chose for this work correspond directly with these "tensions" because they all, with the exception of *Birth of the Nation*, deal with some of the most turbulent times in American history—the Great Depression and/or the civil rights movement.

One of the highlights of Barker's work is her analysis of the novel and the film *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Not only did Barker chose *To Kill a Mockingbird*

because of its continued popularity in American culture, but also because it was one of the first films to deal directly with the connection between the southern rape complex and the justice system. *To Kill a Mockingbird* also fits within Barker's chosen parameters exceedingly well because the story is set during the Great Depression but written and released during the civil rights movement. Barker gives ample attention to both historical contexts and the impact of each turbulent time in American history had on both the novel and film. The context provided by Barker is the key to understanding how the southern rape complex operates in *To Kill a Mockingbird* because the important shifts and changes in the complex are directly related to the historical context.

In her "Coda," Barker examines *A Time to Kill* (1996) as a post-civil rights movement film that employs the southern rape complex while at the same time reflects significant changes in American race relations. Barker highlights how whites pose a threat to white southern society as one of the major alterations of the southern rape complex during this time. Barker's brief discussion of this film, as well as several others from the 1990s and early 2000s, could potentially be a book of its own on the filmic life of the southern race complex after the civil rights movement.

Overall, Barker provides a compelling case for the continuing legacy and cultural power of the southern race complex in film over the last one hundred years. Although the most likely audience for this book is literary critics, historians might possibly find value in this work because of its attention to cultural artifacts such as *The Story of Temple Drake* and *Touch of Evil* which highlight American fears specifically related to the southern race complex at particular historical moments regarding race and sexuality that expand beyond the South or the white versus black racial dichotomy.

Lindsay Silver Hollembaek is a PhD Candidate at Louisiana State University.